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SOME THOUGHTS

ON THE

PRESENT POLITICS OF IRELAND.



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ON THE
PRESENT POLITICS OF IRELAND,

IN A
L E T T E R

TO
ROBERT SIMMS, Esq.
SECRETARY TO THE SOCIETY OF UNITED IRISHMEN OF
BELFAST,

FROM
THEOBALD M'KENNA, M. D.
MEMBER OF THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY.

*O ! malè concordēs, nimîâque cupidine cæci
Quid miscere juvat vires ?
Cum superba foret Babylon spolianda trophæis
Aufoniis, umbrâque erraret Crassus inultâ,
Bella geri placuit nullos habitura triumphos.*

D U B L I N,
PRINTED BY J. CHAMBERS.
M DCC XCII.

SOME THOUGHTS

ON THE

PRESENT POSITION OF IRELAND.

IN A

LECTURE



ROBERT T. B. M. D.
SECRETARY TO THE SOCIETY OF IRELAND
DUBLIN

FROM

THE REV. M. D. M. D.

SECRETARY OF THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY

THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY
DUBLIN

RECEIVED

THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY

SOME THOUGHTS

ON THE

PRESENT POLITICS OF IRELAND.

I WAS a few days since favoured with your letter, enclosing the Declaration and Resolutions of the United Irishmen of Belfast, and acquainting me, that I had the honor to be admitted a member of that public-spirited society. It was my intention, as it certainly was my duty, to testify my respect, by an immediate answer. But unavoidable engagements intervened ; and I was unable to accompany my thanks with such remarks on your institution, and the objects of it, as I thought myself authorised to offer. Indeed, Sir, I augur well to Ireland from this event ;

B

there

there is a great day arising to our country ; excuse me, if I deviate from the strict line of correspondence to exult at it. It was not heretofore disgraceful to have been an Irishman, because we were ridiculed as uncouth, or calumniated as barbarous. No. Our national character was estimable, with all its eccentricities ;—the mixture of dignified virtue, and honest imperfection, which a great writer terms, “ The poetry of a noble nature.” But I blushed, because we permitted ourselves to be imposed on by shallow artifices ; in the exertions of your society I see an end of this illusion.

As if imitating the feudal barons, who deemed it essential to their dignity to create a waste round every mansion ; it has been a policy of England, to depress, what was termed its dependancies. The principle has been reprobated by the intelligent writers of the sister country ; and pronounced erroneous, not less than vicious. Competition must exist, to encourage industry, or rather to call forth latent powers, and exercise the shrewdness of industrious men ; and it surely is better to place the rivalry in a country, whose success, if it shall succeed, is advantageous to the em-

pire; than in a foreign state of which the wealth and activity will usually be hostile: thus Great Britain loses in a double proportion; that, which is subtracted from a friend, and that, which is acquired by an enemy.

Yet such has been the practice of the English cabinet; thus was America treated, until necessitated to sever itself from the empire: thus Scotland, until, dreading a disunion of the crowns, and the inconvenience, if a hardy and spirited people should form an independent state in the island, England purchased the fee and inheritance of that nation's independence by an ample concession of her commercial advantages. In the former instance the danger of this conduct is illustrated; in the latter we have an evidence, that the policy is erroneous; for, the local prosperity of Scotland has not interfered with the welfare of any part of England, but on the contrary has essentially augmented the general strength and riches of the empire.

The Ministers of England could not have been ignorant that the plan they pursued was radically wrong; but Ministers, although they profess the contrary, and sometimes are believed, have one concern, in general more

at heart, than the performance of their duty, They consider, how they may best retain the power they possess, and how they may render the exercise of it most commodious ; it was more easy to be popular in one than in both countries, and popularity in England was more valuable than here. Ministers discerned, and took advantage of, the antipathy, which from the civil wars had remained amongst us ; and leaving the Irish occupied with the pious care of hating and injuring one another, complimented every English town with a portion of our interest, and every English favorite with a portion of our spoil. Can we blame them ? When we offered ourselves an easy prey, it was not to be expected that strangers should suffer the opportunity to escape, and not turn our foolish facility to their own profit.

It was not useful to the English nation, but it was convenient to English ministers, or, perhaps the fault lies nearer home, to the Irish Aristocracy, to detain us in this state of disunion. To accommodate them, we have divided ourselves into distinct nations. To accommodate them, our country has been impoverished by expences, our manufactures

factures suffered to languish, our peasantry kept in want, and the consequences of want, servility and ignorance; all political morals have been destroyed; one party is corrupted by an over proportion of power, the other by slavish subjection. Writers have been employed to foment among the Protestants a jealousy of their fellow-citizens. Historians have been suborned to delineate a hideous picture of the Catholics. It has been inculcated, that they are not amenable to any law, not faithful to any engagement, not docile to any government; as if it were possible, that a few speculative opinions in theology, which have no relation to politics, or common conduct, should so confound, in an entire people, the natural diversities of character, that without any difference of sanguinary or mild, rash or prudent, timid or impetuous, liberal or bigotted, they are ready to attempt the most atrocious crimes, and to undertake the most perilous enterprises; and all without the least personal interest, nay, in opposition to every interest, but merely to procure church livings for the clergy, and to gratify an idle vanity, which none of them, I believe, feel, that of procuring

curing the precedence of their religion. As I have touched upon this subject I must observe, that the Irish Catholics hold the same sentiments, with regard to religious establishments, which all men entertain who have experienced the convenience of having lived without them. The lukewarm would not hazard for the church. Men of piety are convinced, that an hierarchy, supported by voluntary contribution, is more adapted to the purposes of religion, than when enervated by opulence. I make this assertion from my personal knowledge of the Catholics ; but on a moment's consideration every man will see that the fact is consistent with reason ; the only advantage, (if indeed a gratification so frivolous can be called advantage) that the Catholics could hope from the legal pre-eminence of their religion, is the emolument of the clergy, and the public display of ceremonies. While the Protestants continue, what they now are, opulent, powerful, and firm in their religious principles ; such an alteration could not be procured, without commotion ; and is it not supposing them a race of madmen, to believe, that for such trivial objects, they should interrupt the public harmony,

harmony, in which, as deeply, as any other body in the nation, they are interested ?

I will also remark here, on the general imputations thrown out against the character of the Irish Catholics ; that besides the historical facts, by which these charges are refuted ; there is a circumstance of internal evidence, amounting in my mind to demonstration, which proves them to have been less vindictive, and less sanguinary, than any nation amongst whom foreigners had forcibly obtained a settlement. Those, who acquired property by the various revolutions, instantly took possession of their estates, built mansions, and fixed their residence. Now unless they had a complete certainty, that they could live secure, they would have taken the precaution to form villages, or towns, or some mode of association for common safety : as they did not, I conclude the natives to have been, even then, peaceable and acquiescing. In the reign of Charles the Second, the towns were so depopulated, that very considerable advantages were offered to those who would consent to occupy them.

But to return from my digression. These intrigues were not sufficient ; the agents,
whether

whether foreign or domestic, of this profligate and ruinous system, were aware that a little leisure for reflection must remove our alarms; must teach us that it is no way necessary to agree in abstruse questions of theology, in order to pursue our common interest, and the interest of our country. Desirous to frustrate the possibility of accommodating our differences, they called in interest to widen the breach which passion had unfortunately made, and endeavoured to prevent even the intercourse of social life, which might tend to mitigate our animosity. Laws were enacted against the Catholics which Protestants had strong temptations to enforce. Upon the Protestants was to devolve the entire odium of putting them into execution. When these latter had proceeded so far as was necessary to render them hateful to their countrymen, to Administration was reserved the grateful duty of interfering with a display of moderation, and of announcing to the Catholics, how much they were indebted to the kindness of Government for protection against the merciless persecution of their fellow-citizens. Hence the obsequious jargon which many Catholics think themselves bound

bound to use ; hence the great habits of dependance on Government, which that people has contracted. There is no doubt, that the Protestants of Ireland did suffer their Catholic countrymen to receive great obligations from the executive power. The law of Poynings was considered by them for many years our sole protection. Statutes revolting to humanity were suppressed by virtue of this power. The operation of the existing penalties was also by the Crown not a little mitigated. But at best, this only proves, that Government had more wisdom than the Protestant people, or its instigators, the aristocracy. If another conduct had been pursued, the country must of consequence have been depopulated. Urged as a plea of merit, this moderation is no more than what a highwayman might offer, that he has not effected all the mischief he had power to perpetrate :—what Cicero acknowledged to Antony, *latronis beneficium quia me non jugulaverat*. Let it not be insinuated that I offer this statement as reproof. I am willing to allow liberally for the unfortunate spirit, that prevailed in Ireland; and to pardon even to those who were our most deter-

mined enemies the errors they retract, and atone for. But whilst I walk with a reconciled friend over those fields which our strife had deluged with blood, shall we not drop a tear at the monuments of our folly, shall we not look with regret on the piles of carnage that remain, and derive from them a salutary admonition for our future conduct?

Every government that existed, except ours, endeavoured to effect a coalition among its subjects, when divided by the accidental diversity of sentiment, origin, or attachment. Did the house of Tudor, when it obtained the British throne, seek by ill-timed preferences to perpetuate the antipathy of the rival roses? Has not the entire reign of George the third been occupied, in withdrawing the Scotch, from their predilection to the family of Stuart? When the Saxons established themselves in Britain, when the northern nations overran the empire, when William the First conquered England, the victorious nations incorporated with the vanquished; manners, races, languages were blended. It now is an hundred years since the last English colony settled in Ireland, and the races could not early in the present century

century have been more divided than they now are. If there was any object in contemplation but to render us a debased people, we should have been treated like other nations. But we are not. Interested persons keep us at variance, in order to render each party dependant, and to manage all. Why we suffer them, I know not, unless as was said of the Jews, *quos deus vult perdere, prius dementat*. Much of the arcana of this villainy, may be seen in Primate Boulter's state letters. To prove that it is not entirely exploded, I refer you to that libel on the common understanding and information of Ireland, the catechism for the use of the Protestant charter-schools. Primate Boulter, who resided here in quality of an English overseer, early in the present century, speaking of the tumult relative to Woods's halfpence, says, "the worst of this affair is, that it unites Papists and Protestants, and if that reconciliation shall take place, there is an end to English influence in this country." If English influence implies, the corrupt misrule, which, in the days of that prelate, harraffed Ireland; I trust there is little doubt, that the prophecy will be verified.

If he designed the confederacy of two independent kingdoms, of whom the strength is united and the interests common ; who are sworn to stand or fall together ; even in our days, perhaps, we may shew, that the prediction was rashly hazarded ; that the unity of the empire can be maintained without the degradation of any of its members ; that it may best be preserved by a coalition, not alone of the whole Irish, but of the whole British and Irish people, pursuing the same views, attached to the same sovereign, participating in the same constitution.

The declaration of the society has well described the state of Ireland—“ *we have no national government.*” But so successfully have designing men laboured to embroil us, that I am compelled to rejoice at the humiliation of my country. In the temper that prevailed, it was fortunate we had been deprived of our national government ; if the intrigues of England had not caused a diversion and prevented the Protestants from obtaining the power, they might have expected to enjoy, the situation of the Catholics would have been deplorable ; instead of a despotism softened by modern manners, under which
they

they suffered, they would in some parts of Ireland have been reduced to a state not differing widely from domestic slavery. The cares of this country have hitherto, like those of an Inquisition, been directed to the suppression of a proscribed sect; and its politics limited, like those of a monastery, to procuring profelytes. I rejoice that no national Government existed, and until I see ample security for future good conduct given by the Protestants; *I shall continue not to regret that there exists no national Government.*

Your town has long been the depositary of public spirit, your citizens to their eternal honor have made the first advances in this cause; some other bodies of protestants have acknowledged their error, and taken steps to atone for it; but more decisive measures are still to be adopted; you are constituents, you can address your representatives; you are men; you formerly declined to enforce certain English statutes, you can refuse to countenance at present those who are still anxious to persecute; you can agree to consider him, an enemy to his country, who himself or by his agents, puts the Popery Oath at an Election. You can agree unanimously to withdraw

draw your support from such candidate. The laws will not execute themselves, and by these means, if the legislature should differ from the nation, they will become obsolete.

It has been the greatest blessing, that ever occurred to Ireland, that the project of reform, produced some years back in this country, was defeated; it would not have removed corruption, but changed it from bad to worse; and our situation would have been irretrievable, as subsequent amendments must have become extremely difficult. It is the misfortune of this country, that the number of electors bears no proportion to the population. This reform did not propose to augment the electors, but it would have conferred new rights on the present existing body: The commodity to be bartered would in consequence have risen in value, and the temptation to dispose of it, become stronger. If the constituents were tenfold, what now they are, acts of protection and kindness, by which public spirit is destroyed, could not be offered to all; and for a fraction, it could answer no purpose to undertake them; in the present state of county representation, in vain would country gentlemen endeavor to dictate to their representative;

representative ; by the sacrifice of a small annual sum, he can make so many forty shilling freeholders, as will render their exertions ineffectual ; thus the contest is, not, who shall best consult his country's interest in Parliament ; but who can procure the greatest number of indigent Protestants ; whom he may convert into dependant freeholders. Another inconvenience arises from this system : —the lower order of Roman Catholics are discouraged from improving, and disheartened by the continual preference Protestants of the same rank obtain above them ; and the freeholder becomes indolent, because he sees an avenue different from Industry, by which he may attain some independence, and a great superiority of importance above his fellows. Equalizing rights must then produce a twofold benefit : diminishing the vanity of the poor Protestant, and elevating the spirit of the poor Roman Catholic ; it will leave to both but one honest competition, —to cultivate and to improve the country.

I will illustrate more strongly my assertion, that the plan of reform, proposed by Mr. Flood and Mr. Brownlow from the Convention to Parliament, would have produced a
great

great national calamity. A portion, already too powerful, when considered with relation to the rest, of the people was to receive additional aggrandizement. In proportion as the influence of the Protestant inhabitants increases, their passions must be flattered and their interest gratified, at the expence, no doubt of the remaining inhabitants; every animosity against Catholics must be humored, and while the sects are at variance, we know such animosities will occur: without preference to an industrious or improving tenant, every foot of ground at all valuable will be leased to Protestants. It was in fact a bill for completing, what that abominable Popery code had left unaccomplished; for converting the Catholic peasantry into mere hewers of wood and drawers of water; or hunting them into bogs and mountains. If carried into effect, it would have proved an eternal bar to the cultivation of the country; nay, every landlord would have sustained a diminution of his rent-roll. Had the Catholics acted wisely at that time, or in the manner I trust they will, if a similar occurrence should again afford occasion; they ought by assidu-
ous

ous application and a strong petition to Parliament to have opposed the measure.

But it is not alone that this project would have proved ruinous to the Catholics ; it was insufficient for the purpose designed, and to the Protestants must have been useless. Boroughs instead of dependant, should have become vilely corrupt, and whatever political morals are in the nation have been utterly subverted. Let me exemplify this assertion, by an instance, which I shall take the liberty to make personal, that the evidence may be perspicuous. Let us suppose that the Duke of Leinster, (whom every friend to Ireland names with honor,) possesses a power to nominate the representatives of three boroughs. If the plan of reform, I allude to, had been accomplished, these boroughs should have been thrown open to the Protestant inhabitants ; that is each to less than one hundred persons. Over so small a number, the influence of the original patron would not have been destroyed, this effect alone was likely to ensue from the alteration, that he would have been obliged to encrease his assiduity to individuals, and on the whole to adopt a conduct of electioneering stratagems. If the electors were

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compliant

compliant, he should be attentive to gratify their private interest and those of their connexions. If refractory, by introducing additional Protestant residents he could counter-balance them ; in either case the entire burden falls on the disfranchised Roman Catholics.

But grant that you could succeed, to oust the borough proprietor, from his influence, it does not follow that the elector, who obtained these new powers, would be made more virtuous by the acquisition—as happens, in some instances under your own inspection ; the voters, being neither sufficiently opulent to resist corruption, nor sufficiently numerous to render individual venality immaterial, representation would become the easy prey of placemen and pensioners ; farmers general of the Irish people, who hire a seat in Parliament in order to retail the use of it. And thus, in the room of one honorable person, whose passions, principles, and interest can never differ essentially from those of his country, you would have six supple courtiers, without passion, principle, or interest, except their personal and temporary emolument. Such must be the effect of every reform, of which the basis is not impartial liberty ; and so

so may every project perish, of which the object is not the diffusion of equal rights through every description of amenable citizens !

But it is not alone, that these measures must have proved inadequate, to procure the welfare of Ireland ; I have strong doubts, as to the propriety of any opposition to Government, unless the interest of the Catholics be included—Who are these presumptuous men, who venture to appoint limits for the tide of public spirit? and arrogantly exclaim, “ So far shalt thou go, and no further.” I will not venture to pronounce their conduct criminal, I am sure it is injudicious. Without designing the greatest good, of the greatest number, the only motive, by which resistance to established order, can be justified, they interrupt the confidence, that should subsist between sovereign and subject. As if to decoy the Catholics into sedition, they pompously detail the advantages of liberty, and teach us to prize as inestimable, that which they are resolved not to communicate; and this conduct is practised in a country, in which the individuals of the proscribed party must encounter the frown of authority and all the insolence of office, when they use the

common rights, and claim the common benefits of a free subject. It is not consistent to upbraid misconduct to administration, whilst the accusers are guilty of flagrant injustice, and usurp the birthright of their fellow citizens. It is not politic to agitate the question of privilege before three millions of spectators irrevocably predestined to slavery by the political combatants. It is not honest, to harass the country, and impede the operations of Government, for the convenience of a minority. If two thirds of the nation are incompetent to enjoy freedom, those who remain, submitting to the stroke of fate which assigned to them such unworthy company, should adopt the cause of Government, with its encroachments, and expenditures ; every popular harangue, every festival of freedom, every commemoration to liberty, is *Brute dormis* to the Roman Catholics of Ireland.

I dread I have been prolix in this discussion, but I did not imagine I could better express my grateful sense of the honor done me by the Society, than by endeavouring to expose the whole extent of the evil you propose to remedy.—I lose all patience, at the system of duplicity that has been practised in
this

this country. The accidental antipathy of two great parties, is endeavoured to be laid down, as a vice inherent in their respective natures. Because political prejudices once existed between us, (and I hope I have not failed in tracing them to their real origin,) these designing persons would insinuate that they must be of necessity immortal.—At the æra of the reformation, the well-known circumstances of the reformation itself, inveterated the dissent which might have otherwise been innocent. The civil wars in this country prolonged, and the arts of our enemies were exerted to perpetuate, the dissension. But, in the name of God, why should difference on a question of religion, more than on a controverted point of metaphysics or philosophy, be introduced into politics? Attentive only to the points, on which we are at variance, shall we never recollect the innumerable articles on which we agree, and look on the gospel as a covenant of union; not an eternal source of heart-burnings, of discord and misery?—No; statesmen make of the sacred writings, that use that was formerly upbraided to ecclesiastics, “ They call
down

down heaven to divide the earth *.”—And they receive lectures, which they might blush to merit, from that order of men, heretofore decried in this country, the Roman Catholic Clergy.

It is vainly imagined that the disfranchisement of the Catholics is the security of the establishment. The Catholics can scarcely be expected to look with patience on the church, when, besides the other inconveniencies, they are informed that its existence is connected with their bondage: If they possessed every right and advantage the country affords, save only ecclesiastical revenues, they certainly could not be supposed so insane as to embroil the state, when, considering the power of England, and the strength of the other sects, they never could hope to substitute their own to that now established. The privation of rights is again mistaken for the cause of their subjection, it is in fact the effect, and to both evils there is a remote cause, the Catholics of Ireland did not think.

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* An expression lately used in a charity sermon, by the Rev. Mr. Conolly, an amiable and eloquent Roman Catholic clergyman of this city.

It was a wise precaution of their masters to deprive them of the means of information ; but that precaution is now to a certain degree eluded. His Majesty's ministers have it for their consideration what means they will devise to perpetuate the slavery of a people, who have learned their importance in the state, who have begun to communicate with each other on the subject of their grievances, and in expressing their sentiments to use the freedom of the press, a remnant which accidentally escaped in the general havoc of their privileges. The Irish Catholics have ceased to exist for the mere purpose of professing loyalty and paying taxes. * I repeat it again, the

* I should have excepted the *loyal* addressers of Kerry, and Kilkenny. There is a particular breed of sheep in Spain who are annually led to the royal collector, by whom they are numbered, and the duty payable on them levied. If on the appointed day the shepherd neglects to conduct them, it is said that they will set out themselves upon the journey. Until this ~~fact~~ be disproved, the pastors of these counties, and the flocks that adhere to them, cannot, without hesitation, be pronounced the most submissive subjects in Europe.

the Irish Catholics have exercised their understandings, they have thought in the weak addresses, that have been imposed on individuals; they have reflected in the spirited claim of rights, which these addresses extorted from every quarter of the kingdom. Those who now enjoy the smile of a court, as well as those who meet the frown of authority, and who despise it, have alike been taught their political importance. The very discussion which those gentlemen provoked, who call themselves the friends of Administration, will, in the end, accomplish the emancipation of the Catholics. Instructed as they have been by this controversy, it will only be necessary to disabuse the deluded, they will readily discern their real interest. Even the injudicious attempts lately made to procure a surrender of their remaining rights, will endear to them the scanty relique of their fathers' freedom, the liberty of the press, the right of remonstrance, the privilege of discussion; entrenching within these, they will appeal to their countrymen, for without your aid their emancipation can never be effected.—They will not be deterred by the senseless howl of sedition, but let not their

their enemies cherish the idea that they will marr their fair prospects by any giddy tumult. There is too much good sense in the Irish Catholics to attempt that which they are incompetent to accomplish, and which, if they did succeed, would be in fact but laying waste that constitution in which they can acquire without commotion a valuable inheritance. But we will rest upon remonstrance the succedaneum for force which a free constitution offers. Upon discussion, a middle point, between submission to grievances and exertions to redress them, the enemies of Ireland shall "hear daggers tho' not feel them." Good sense will at length triumph over bigotry ; and every Irish Protestant, as he loves his own freedom, will countenance the honest efforts of his countrymen to obtain it. Flapping away his *Majesty's* petty officers who bestow the appellation of a rabble upon a gallant people, the Crown will listen to us ! craving as a boon a portion of that liberty designed by Heaven the common benefit of its creatures, and offering a friendship solicited in vain by every alien nation, reserved for the fastidious

rejection of our country. Administration will listen to the voice of the substantial people of Ireland pleading their own grievances, and the misery of their brethren. If virtuous, it will respect property diffused; from that state the greatest number of industrious subjects receive employment. It will attend, if wise, to that order of men who produce most revenue, and whose influence is most extensive.

Permit me, Sir, again to renew my congratulations on the formation of your Society. You have indeed given an honourable example to your country. An example of patriotism and benevolence, the virtues of most comprehensive operation; amidst the noblest that animate the human heart; amidst the purest that emanate from our common gospel. To be free is the right of every nation: by some the blessing is possessed; by others, like the sword of the degraded noble, it is withheld until they have spirit to make the claim, and virtue to adhere to it. If my prophecy be accomplished, that an energy of character is now rising among the Irish Catholics, the period of their emancipation is not

not far distant. Whatever degree of success awaits our labours ; whatever may be the event of our expostulation, to your society and your citizens we must ever look with gratitude ; we must ever recollect, that, for the first commiseration of our state, for the first admonition to amend it ; we are indebted to you, our spirited and philosophic countrymen.

I have the honour,

SIR, to be,

with very great respect, &c.

THEOBALD M'KENNA.

DUBLIN, 22d January, 1792.

Robt. Simms, Esq;
Belfast.

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THEOBALD W. KENNEDY

Dorchester, and January 1790

Rev. Sir,

Yours

